FSIS Facts

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Food Safety and Inspection Service

Inspection of Meat and Poultry Imports

Is that imported ham or liver paté safe to eat? How can you be sure your "New Zealand spring lamb" is really spring lamb from New Zealand? You may have questions about imported meat and poultry products that you don't have about domestic products, which you know are prepared under strict inspection. The fact is--so are imports.

The Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is responsible for assuring that imported meat and poultry products, like domestic products, are wholesome, unadulterated, and accurately labeled. This responsibility is derived from the Federal Meat Inspection Act and the Poultry Products Inspection Act. Under these laws, in order to be eligible to have their meat or poultry products imported into the United States, other countries must impose inspection requirements "at least equal to" U.S. requirements.

FSIS carries out its import inspection responsibility with a two-pronged approach. First is **system review**--an evaluation of the laws, policies, and administration of the inspection system in each eligible country. The overall evaluation is supplemented by onsite reviews of individual plants, laboratories, and other facilities within the foreign system.

The second aspect is **port-of-entry inspection** by USDA inspectors, which verifies the effectiveness of foreign inspection systems. Products that do not meet U.S. standards are refused entry.

Imported products that are further processed in this country--such as boneless beef used in beef stew--undergo even more inspection. USDA inspectors in federally inspected plants oversee all aspects of processing, from the time bulk boneless beef enters the plant to the time properly labeled cans of beef stew leave the plant.

Facts About Meat and Poultry Imports

In 1983, the United States imported more than 2 billion pounds of meat, which represents 6 to 8 percent of our total meat supply. Uncooked beef, mostly boneless, represents more than half of meat imports. Uncooked pork accounts for another 14 percent. Other meat imports include canned hams and other pork products, canned corned beef, prepared sausages, and pickled and preserved meat products.

Imported poultry products account for far less than 1 percent of our poultry supply. In 1983 the United States imported slightly more than 6 million pounds of poultry, mostly specialty items, from four countries--Canada, Israel, Hong

Kong, and France. The kinds of products imported include ready-to-cook geese, chickens, turkeys, and ducks; poultry pies; smoked turkey legs; poultry-filled egg rolls; and liver paté.

In 1983, a total of 46 countries were eligible to ship meat, poultry, or both, to the United States. However, more than 70 percent of our imported meat came from only three countries--Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.

Eligible Countries

To become eligible to have its meat or poultry imported into the United States, a country must first make a formal request through diplomatic channels. FSIS then reviews that country's inspection system to determine whether it is "at least equal to" our own. System review begins with an evaluation of foreign inspection laws and regulations that cover the slaughtering, processing, labeling and transportation of meat or poultry products. Their regulations must be equivalent to U.S. requirements.

The foreign system must also be at least equal to the U.S. system with respect to the following: (1) organizational structure and staffing of the inspection program; (2) the degree of control and supervision by the foreign government over the official activities of all employees of the system; (3) the assignment of competent, qualified inspectors; and (4) the authority and responsibility of national inspection officials to enforce laws and regulations governing meat inspection and to certify or refuse to certify products intended for export.

Foreign countries must train and license their own inspection personnel. In 1983, 8,651 inspectors were employed in certified foreign plants.

Certified Plants

Once a country becomes eligible to have its products imported into the United States, foreign inspection officials are responsible for determining which plants meet U.S. standards and certifying them to prepare products for the United States. These plants are certified by use of the same standards applied to domestic plants. In 1983, 1,174 plants were certified to export meat, poultry, or both, to the United States.

Onsite Reviews

Once a country has been declared eligible to import products into the United States and plants within that country are certified, FSIS foreign programs officers periodically review these plants to monitor the effectiveness of foreign inspection. Some officers are based in exporting countries, while others travel as needed from Washington, D.C. Reviewers are chosen from veterinarians with considerable experience in the domestic inspection program, and FSIS relies heavily on their expertise in food hygiene and public health. During 1983, FSIS foreign programs officers conducted 2,130 reviews of certified foreign plants. Only 28 failed to meet USDA standards.

During onsite reviews, FSIS foreign programs officers look at plant layout, equipment, sanitation, the handling of animals, processing operations, how animals are inspected before and after slaughter, labeling, the control of condemned products, and the incidence of animal diseases. In addition, they review laboratory capabilities for residue testing to assure that U.S. standards are met regarding types of tests conducted, organs or tissues used for specific analyses, compounds tested for, and methods used to monitor laboratory functions. Also, reviewers check the entire system of maintaining security over a product as it moves from point of production to the loading dock for export.

FSIS findings are discussed with the foreign inspection officials who accompany the FSIS reviewer. If no health hazard exists and deficiencies can be corrected promptly, shipments from the country usually are not interrupted.

Plant Delistment

If serious deficiencies are found during onsite reviews, or if minor deficiencies have gone uncorrected despite warnings, it may be appropriate to require the foreign country to remove the plant's certification. This action is called "delistment."

If the reviewer finds a problem that is not restricted to an individual plant but occurs throughout a country's inspection system, FSIS may delist all plants in the country until the problem is corrected. In cases where the foreign inspection system cannot be relied upon to carry out its responsibilities, the country's eligibility to ship products to the United States is withdrawn.

These sanctions remain in effect until U.S. officials are satisfied that products destined for this country satisfy U.S. standards.

Port-of-Entry Inspection

All meat and poultry imports must also pass USDA inspection before they enter the United States. Products imported into the United States must meet the same standards as those produced domestically. Port-of-entry inspection is conducted by USDA inspectors at 14 major ports and other inland locations.

There are six basic categories of inspection: net weight, condition of container, condition of product, incubation of canned goods, label examination, and laboratory analysis. Within each category, many different examinations may be assigned, depending on the type of product.

All meat and poultry products, when imported, must be labeled with the name of the country of origin. However, only imported products that reach consumers without further processing retain such labeling. For example, a can of corned beef that goes directly to a retail outlet must state the country of origin on the label. This is not the case for items that are further processed. For example, a can of beef stew that is made with

boneless beef from Australia combined with U.S. products would not indicate the presence of Australian beef.

Since 1979, a computerized system called the Automated Import Information System (AIIS) has helped USDA determine the scope and extent of import inspection. The system stores inspection results from all ports of entry. In this way, inspectors have immediate access to import inspection results on products from each foreign plant. When a shipment arrives at a port, information on the shipment is entered into the system. Then, based on a plant's history of compliance with inspection regulations, the nature of the product, and the size of the shipment, the AIIS generates an inspection plan. Under this plan, a lot may not receive every possible examination.

The system allows USDA to concentrate inspection on plants that present the highest risk. However, USDA inspectors are still required to examine each lot of a product for general condition, proper certification, and labeling. They also must take samples for residue and species testing at regular intervals. In addition, inspectors can override the sampling plan whenever they suspect a problem. For example, an inspector who detects an unusual odor would conduct a full inspection and take samples for laboratory testing.

Whenever one lot fails inspection, all related lots in the shipment are tested for that problem. Generally, inspection is intensified whenever a lot fails inspection or when no products are imported for a 180-day period.

When a product successfully passes inspection, boxes are stamped "U.S. Inspected and Passed" and are allowed to move freely in U.S. commerce.

In 1983, 99.2 percent of meat products and 99.4 percent of poultry products presented for import inspection were approved for sale in the United States.

Products Refused Entry

If FSIS determines that a meat or poultry product does not meet U.S. standards, it is refused entry. The importer must either ship the product out of the country, convert it to nonhuman food use, or destroy it. The products remain under official hold by FSIS until the importer takes appropriate action. If no action is taken within 45 days, FSIS destroys the product.

Results of port-of-entry inspection, like foreign plant reviews, can lead to plant delistment or removal of a country's eligibility to have its products imported into the United States.

In 1983, USDA refused entry to less than 1 percent of imported products. This low rejection figure attests to the effectiveness of both foreign and U.S. inspection systems.

Residues

Meat and poultry products that contain illegal levels of drug and chemical residues are considered adulterated. Residues include environmental contaminants such as PCB (polychlorinated biphenyls), animal drugs such as DES (diethylstilbestrol), pesticides such as DDT, and trace elements such as lead. The Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency set legal limits for residues in foods. FSIS enforces these limits in domestic and imported meat and poultry products.

Countries eligible to export products to the United States must have FSIS-approved residue testing programs. They must test livestock at slaughter for a variety of agricultural chemicals and animal drugs, and must control and regulate the use of these compounds. To verify the effectiveness of these programs, FSIS reviews residue controls and agricultural practices in exporting countries. As an added verification, FSIS inspectors sample incoming products at regular, specified intervals and send them to laboratories for residue analysis.

A computerized table that reflects the residues likely to be found in a particular product helps determine the laboratory analyses to be conducted. For example, because of the widespread use of chlorinated hydrocarbon pesticides, 70 percent of samples of uncooked beef are analyzed for chlorinated hydrocarbons.

The port-of-entry residue testing program has two phases--monitoring (or routine) and surveillance. When violative levels of a residue are found in a product from a particular plant, the surveillance phase is triggered for that plant. Each shipment is then sampled for residues and held until acceptable U.S. laboratory test results are received. When enough samples have been tested to demonstrate that the problem is resolved, the plant is returned to the monitoring phase.

U.S. and foreign inspection systems have been effective in reducing the number of residue violations. In 1979, the monitoring program found 60 violations in 3,546 import samples. In 1983, however, more samples were taken--4,536--but only 7 violations were detected.

U.S. Farm Bill of 1981

The 1981 Farm Bill amended the Federal Meat Inspection Act to require equal standards for imported and domestic products, particularly in residue testing and species verification programs.

Residue Control

In the past, residue control has been a particular concern in imported products because of differing laws governing the use of chemicals that may result in residues in meat and poultry products, and because foreign residue control programs varied in intensity. Under the Farm Bill, countries shipping products to the United States must demonstrate that their residue control program is equivalent to that of FSIS. For example,

they must have adequate laboratory facilities with suitable equipment and properly trained staff, they must use FSIS-accepted laboratory tests and procedures, and they must test for compounds in the tissues or organs in which those particular residues would concentrate.

Species Verification

The 1981 Farm Bill also requires foreign countries to demonstrate that their program to prevent species violations is equivalent to that of FSIS. They must have adequate security measures to prevent such problems and/or effective testing programs for species verification.

Species verification assures, for example, that a product labeled "beef" is indeed beef and not horsemeat. In late 1981, FSIS began routine species testing at port-of-entry inspection. One species violation has been discovered through testing. Also, in 1983 an alert port-of-entry inspector uncovered a "beef" shipment that contained pork. This was verified through laboratory testing, and the product was refused entry.

In 1983, import inspectors began using a simple, fast, inexpensive, and accurate species verification test called ORBIT (Overnight Rapid Beef Identification Test). Since the new test can be carried out right at the port, it saves time and money. Previously, entire shipments had to remain in freezers awaiting test results from the laboratories.

Summary

During the past few years, FSIS has taken several steps to modernize and strengthen the import inspection program. These include focusing on a country's entire inspection system rather than on individual plants, the use of computer systems, and improved control of rejected product.

FSIS has also taken several actions to strengthen training and supervision of import inspectors. The inspection manual for import inspectors was revised to more clearly define minor, major, and critical defects in imported canned and packaged products. A new formal training program for import inspectors and supervisors that covers all aspects of import inspection was initiated. The agency also holds "correlation" sessions for import inspectors to assure that inspection requirements are applied consistently.

FSIS will continue to place a strong emphasis on improving its import inspection program. As a result, American consumers can be assured that imported meat and poultry products meet the same high standards as domestic product.